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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

Verlag Barbara Budrich

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Gook, B. (2016). Nancy Fraser's Zeitdiagnose: Capitalism after the Financial Crisis; report on the workshop 'Justice, Feminism and the Critique of Capitalism', University of Erfurt, October 17-18, 2016. *ZPTh - Zeitschrift für Politische Theorie*, 7(2), 260-264. <https://doi.org/10.3224/zpth.v7i2.11>

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Nancy Fraser's *Zeitdiagnose*: Capitalism after the Financial Crisis

Ben Gook*

Report on the workshop *Justice, Feminism and the Critique of Capitalism*, University of Erfurt, October 17–18, 2016

In recent years, amid financial crises and disaffection around the world, several prominent theorists and philosophers have been revisiting the Frankfurt School critical theory tradition. Nancy Fraser's work has been among the most incisive of this recent uptick in crisis-theoretical research. Fraser has increasingly insisted on keeping *capitalism* at the center of critical theory. A stimulating workshop with Fraser organized by the Max Weber Kolleg (*Urs Lindner*) and the Faculty of Law, Social Sciences and Economics (*Stefanie Hammer*) at the University of Erfurt proved she will not be diverted from that key task: the critique of capitalism. Even so, Fraser's insistence does not come at the expense of her synthetic reading – and her earlier writing – around many other topics, nor does it lay her open to the bogeyman of 'economism'.

In Fraser's current work, she argues capitalism is something larger than an economy. In this expanded conception, capitalism is an *institutionalised social order*, constituted by a set of structural divisions and institutional separations. Most prominently, these include: the gendered split between 'economic production' and 'social reproduction', which defines, among other things, what work is

paid; the 'economy' and 'polity' division, which ostensibly expels economic questions from political control; and an ecological separation of (nonhuman) 'natural' background and (apparently nonnatural) 'human' foreground, which demarcates natural from human resources. Capitalism is then marked for Fraser (see 2014a) by a structural imbrication with gender domination, various political oppressions (national, transnational, colonial, postcolonial) and ecological degradation.

The workshop took up each of Fraser's current concerns, pulling apart Fraser's unashamedly totalizing *Zeitdiagnose* to consider its strongest themes. Introducing the first open session¹, *Urs Lindner* described three consecutive periods of Fraser's social theoretical work: first, the period on feminism, discourse and power, culminating in her *Unruly Practices* collection in 1989; second, the period on redistribution, recognition and representation; third, and most recently, a renewed critique of capitalism, present in the two earlier periods but only now in focus.

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- 1 The first day began with a session discussing 'women in science' for people who self-identify as female or genderqueer. That session will not be discussed in this report, but it responded to a recent article in which Fraser (2012) discusses her experience as a female academic.

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With an eye especially on that third period, the consecutive sessions were organized around the themes of several new books Fraser is drafting: first, *Capitalism, Crisis, Critique*; second, a book expanding her work on Marx's hidden abodes and Karl Polanyi; third, a dialogue with Humboldt University social philosopher Rahel Jaeggi, another prominent voice in recent Frankfurt School discussions. As these projects make clear, the task Fraser has set for herself in her third phase is to understand capitalism's crisis dynamics without economism or functionalism. Thus, what are the self-destabilizing institutionalized contradictions of capitalism? To answer this question, she wants a multidirectional analysis that does not lose a Marxian insistence on the economy's propulsive force. While other recent crisis theories have tended to privilege a single aspect (for example, the financial or ecological), Fraser set out in the workshop her case for an integrated crisis critique in a world that demands it – namely, to make sense of a tridimensional crisis and reveal prospects for an emancipatory resolution (Fraser 2014b).

Petra Gumplova introduced Fraser's article "Reframing Justice in a Globalizing World" (2005). This article is Fraser's clearest statement about the Keynesian Westphalian frame's waning relevance. Its argument was a response to 'globalization' as it played out for official political actors and social movements – and researchers – within territorially demarcated nation-states. It moved Fraser towards questions of representation, a subject which carries through to her recent work and came into discussion across the workshop, particularly considering the recent Brexit vote and revenant nationalisms. In this context, revisiting this writing from over a decade ago, the discussion dealt with framing and representation in politics: what is afforded and foreclosed by institutional and discursive frames of, for example, the nation; how are justice claims demanded; to whom can those claims be addressed, and so on. As such, these ideas connect with Fraser's more recent theorisation of 'boundary

struggles' – the ways institutional divisions become foci of conflict, as actors challenge or defend boundaries between, for instance, production and reproduction (Fraser 2016).

The fortunes of some such struggles were introduced by *Hannah Peaceman*, who looked at the ambivalence and ambiguity – the cunning of history, as Fraser calls it – of feminist movements in capitalism. For instance, a 'progressive neoliberalism' (Fraser 2017), perhaps best embodied by the Democratic Party in the US, has co-opted radically emancipatory aspects of feminism while turning them to market friendly, mildly reformist or outright regressive ends (as the workshop took place shortly before the US election, Hillary Clinton came in for many pointed comments). Fraser considers this to be symptomatic of current social movements' weak emancipatory claims.² On the second day, recent feminist debates returned in a session addressing social reproduction and crises of care. *Tanja Visic* introduced Fraser's 2016 article on the contradictions of capital and care. Visic argued that the North-South division, which Fraser was concerned with in her picture of a global division of care, could also be translated into a West-East division in Europe, where the post-socialist countries provide female care workers for those in the 'core' cities of the EU. Here, Fraser referenced Arlie Hochschild's metaphor about love as the new gold, signifying the transfer of care from one pole to another (for example, Latin America to New York, Warsaw to London) in an extractive, exploitative dynamic that fittingly conjures

2 Discussing recent feminist work, Fraser noted her discomfort with intersectionality, which she sees as a well-intentioned but diminished version of socialist feminism's understanding of a social matrix. For her, this weakness sees it devolving into a battle between 'subject positions' and 'identity claims' with an under-theorised account of social relations of domination and of the social whole. This critique echoes Sue Ferguson (2016) and Cinzia Arruzza (2016), with whom Fraser shares an interest in social-reproduction feminisms' re-emergence.

the history of mining for needed resources. This hidden ‘backstory’ of capitalism’s reproduction in the west then joined other discussions at the workshop about racial logic and labor regimes. Fraser brought these together in another of her alliterative trios for understanding capitalism: exchange, exploitation and expropriation.

Urs Lindner challenged Fraser’s three background conditions and institutional divisions. He turned Fraser against Fraser, arguing that her article “What is Critical about Critical Theory?” (1985) offered a competing and compelling conception – or ‘grammar,’ as Lindner said in appropriately Fraserian terminology – of capitalism’s institutional order. In this critically expanded Habermasian view, boundary struggles would exist between market economy, state, civil society and household. Fraser responded only briefly, defending her current position, which she finds more critically productive. Shifting from boundary struggles to contradictions, *Arthur Bueno* drew out two ideas of contradiction in Fraser’s work. Again, in response, she said she was comfortable with a straightforward Marxist account of contradiction (meaning intra-economic contradictions or institutionalised, mutually contradictory imperatives within an economic system), while nevertheless supplementing this with a Polanyian understanding of contradiction. For Fraser, this introduces an inspiring new angle on the Marxian account by theorising inter-institutional contradictions between, in Polanyi’s terms, ‘economy’ and ‘society’, although she finds the latter term too undifferentiated. So, Marx plus Polanyi – two Karls are better than one, as the title of her keynote lecture in Erfurt a few weeks later put it. In other remarks about reification and commodification, Fraser felt Bueno and Lindner tempted romantic understandings of pre-capitalist forms of life, as well as ethical and ontological claims (for example, the language of pathologies), which are not primary in her critique of capitalism.

After all, Fraser’s critical theory of capitalism as an institutionalised social order

means it encompasses its background conditions of possibility – those areas of life outside the economy but inside capitalism in this expanded sense – thereby leaving little room for realms untouched by capitalism. A session on the natural environment extended the discussion of background conditions. Outlining Fraser’s writing on the topic in “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode” (2014a), *Petra Gümplöva* raised the issue of nature’s exploitation in capitalism and socialism, both of which turned ‘nature’ into ‘natural resources’, available for appropriation, to be used without compensation. Gümplöva reflected on the relevance of foundational modern ideas of natural law in Grotius (*Mare Liberum*) and Locke (man has an individual, natural right to turn into private property that with which he toils). She then linked Marx’s account of primitive accumulation to colonialism’s ongoing takeover of natural resources: an external expansion (colonialism, the doctrine of discovery) of internal dispossession (primitive accumulation). She emphasized a historical sense that colonialism and environmental extraction are deeply linked, and continue to be in ostensibly ‘postcolonial’ times. Sovereignty over natural resources is used for domination and exploitation, confiscation and enclosure. Consequently, Gümplöva thinks we need to ask about *rights* to natural resources. Fraser was skeptical of a tacit Westphalian line here (which sovereign collectivity do we address with a rights claim, is it the bounded state?) – so she questioned whether sovereignty is the correct critical concept and political frame. In a world with a global division of labor, financial flows and intensely imbricated relations, the idea of ‘our territory’ is increasingly problematic, as most things flow into production and reproduction across sovereign, nation-state demarcations.

Christoph Henning then broached two conceptions of ‘nature’. Objective discussions of nature lead to rights talk and distribution questions (per Gümplöva), while subjective discussions touch on a romantic dimension that sees the human not only as a

social but also a natural being. Henning was interested in retrieving this discussion of human nature – a lost Marxist Humanism, perhaps – from its neglect after many became unwilling to risk ‘essentialism’. For Henning, rather than ontological discussions, these subjective dimensions lead on to political and social movements (for example, ecology), where nature is not an object for us to burn up, but a shared basis for human life. Fraser again resisted this line, instead insisting that capitalism, in her expanded sense, creates a certain bifurcation of nature. In one place, capitalism will construct a specifically economic realm, practice and orientation to nature (resource stripping, land grabbing: nature as costless and abundant). In another, it creates a ‘natural nature’ (what should be preserved: most famously, the photogenic flora and fauna of national parks). Nature as an aesthetic experience becomes the antithesis of nature we must mine and use. As *Hartmut Rosa* put it in the discussion, a mountain is exploited and mined while an image of it is hung in the lounge room as a scene of sublime majesty; a laboratory chimp or rat is unfeeling matter for scientific intervention, while a domestic pet is a ‘useless’ source of affection and resonance.

Once more, this brought out one of Fraser’s key claims: capitalism creates a world of institutionalized separations that go with alternative orientations, ideologies, narratives and normativities (for example, ‘priceless’ sublime experience versus profitable use). Fraser stressed how capitalism encourages us to sharpen modernity’s division between human and nature. Massive consequences have followed because these divisions have become too entrenched, but that doesn’t mean the answer is to collapse the divisions. She suggested that we need both sides of this story to think about how much the romantic, aesthetic relationship to nature is precisely not one that sees it as an object of use: does it offer resources to be used in a non-mystifying way for an anti-capitalist eco-socialist democratic movement? Can such a position function in an offensively

critical way, not a defensive conservative way?

In the final session, *David Strecker* brought to the fore Habermasian themes in Fraser’s work on crises. Her recent article about political legitimization crisis (Fraser 2015) is her most explicit engagement with Habermas in some time. Strecker argued that where Fraser falls back on a false consciousness explanation of why legitimization deficits have not fully unfolded into crises, a more promising approach can be found in Habermas’ colonisation thesis, which suggests instead a fragmented consciousness. While supporting Fraser’s efforts in bringing social theory back to critical theory, Strecker noted some gaps in her theory of society, particularly around the relevance of, and relations between, different spheres. Likewise, Strecker felt introducing hegemony into the account was promising but that it also has not yet satisfactorily explained legitimization deficits. So, a diagnostic question emerged in the dialogue between Fraser and Strecker: are we witnessing legitimization crises – and are these increasingly coming from the political right (that is, a right on the streets, demanding new constitutions, trespassing political frames and systems)?

These questions were prompted too by the final paper, in which *Emiliano Urciuoli* made a necessarily brief but interesting comparison between Fraser’s article and Honneth’s (2016) recent attempt to elucidate an idea of socialism for the present – or, rather, Honneth’s skepticism of socialism’s chances today. Fraser and Honneth share the position that Marxism’s ‘economic monism’ has overlooked ‘the political’ and other non-economic spheres – a weakness that sees Marxism unable to make accurate predictions and has diminished its social resonance. Fraser’s position is the more radical of the two, however, with a clear belief in the efficacy, prospects and necessity of social movements to generate emancipatory change. Honneth casts his hope with sandbagging the institutionalised achievements of postwar struggles. These reminders of past

success thereby become an institutional archive that might inspire future ideas. Bizarrely, Honneth says this despite a near three-decade attack on those institutions, as Urciuoli pointed out. What Fraser and Honneth share, however, is an awareness of recent protest movements' ephemerality and our present cul-de-sac. Fraser nevertheless takes heart from these outbursts that have temporarily configured a progressive commonsense, while Honneth remains skeptical and pessimistic.

The workshop made clear that Nancy Fraser continues to bring her core critique and theories into dialogue with crucial questions among radical theorists and activists. Throughout the workshop's two days, the emancipatory aims of critical theory were in plain sight. She was particularly adamant that anti-racism and feminism must be incorporated into a contemporary critical theory of capitalism that updates its Frankfurt origins. For Fraser, critical theory *must* be reconsidered and reworked to bolster its claims. It must today include people and social forces marginal, displaced or invisible in its original formulations as well as too much of the work built upon it (see also Allen 2016). Fraser stressed she had in view 'a transnational feminist socialism' or, in a variation, 'an anti-imperial feminist socialism,' or, in another, 'a postcolonial feminist socialism' – she also added 'ecological' and 'democratic' at other points. Although admirable in their attempt to be comprehensive, these phrasings felt uncharacteristically unwieldy for a thinker so often so clear in her diagnosis. Critical theory would in turn diagnose that this symptomatic breakdown in clarity signals not a problem with the concepts per se, but with the fragmented social struggles that cannot yet find a basis for conceptual, social and political unity.

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